

Moving Forward TOGETHER

(Stories from the Women's Movement)



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About this Resource Book

Why did we write this book?

We, at UMA have been interacting with elected women representatives for some time now and trying to understand their perceptions, attitudes and feelings. One thing that came through clearly was that their intrinsic skills were many but they had little or no access to knowledge and information. For them, knowledge is liberation and empowerment. Had they heard about the collective struggles of their sisters in other parts of the country? Not surprisingly many had not. Why not, we thought, collate some of the stories of the Indian Women's Movement as resource material for elected women representatives? We have kept the language and narrative style simple for widest possible use (Perhaps including its use as a primer for neo-literates)

As we prepared this book, it became increasingly clear that continued and sustained struggles are the need of the hour. Once the initial momentum of the issue wears off, the movement slows down or is pushed off course by vested interests. Often a movement for social justice, however powerful, is negated by the non-receptivity of a distant government. This fact again underscores the need for effective local bodies, proximate to the people.

These incidents are empowering in themselves. They can be used in facilitation programmes as role-plays and as discussion material to focus on the strengths of collective action and women's intrinsic abilities. These stories also define a value system for social action based on non-violence, co-operation and consensus.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

As you can see from this map of India, women have taken up issues and struggled for justice in several parts of the country. From different regions, different languages, different cultures, different lives, the common thread is the collective will of women against injustice. We have recorded only a few of the stories here; there are many, many more.

To face violence with non-violence, injustice with patience and unity, together women can work towards a just and peaceful society.

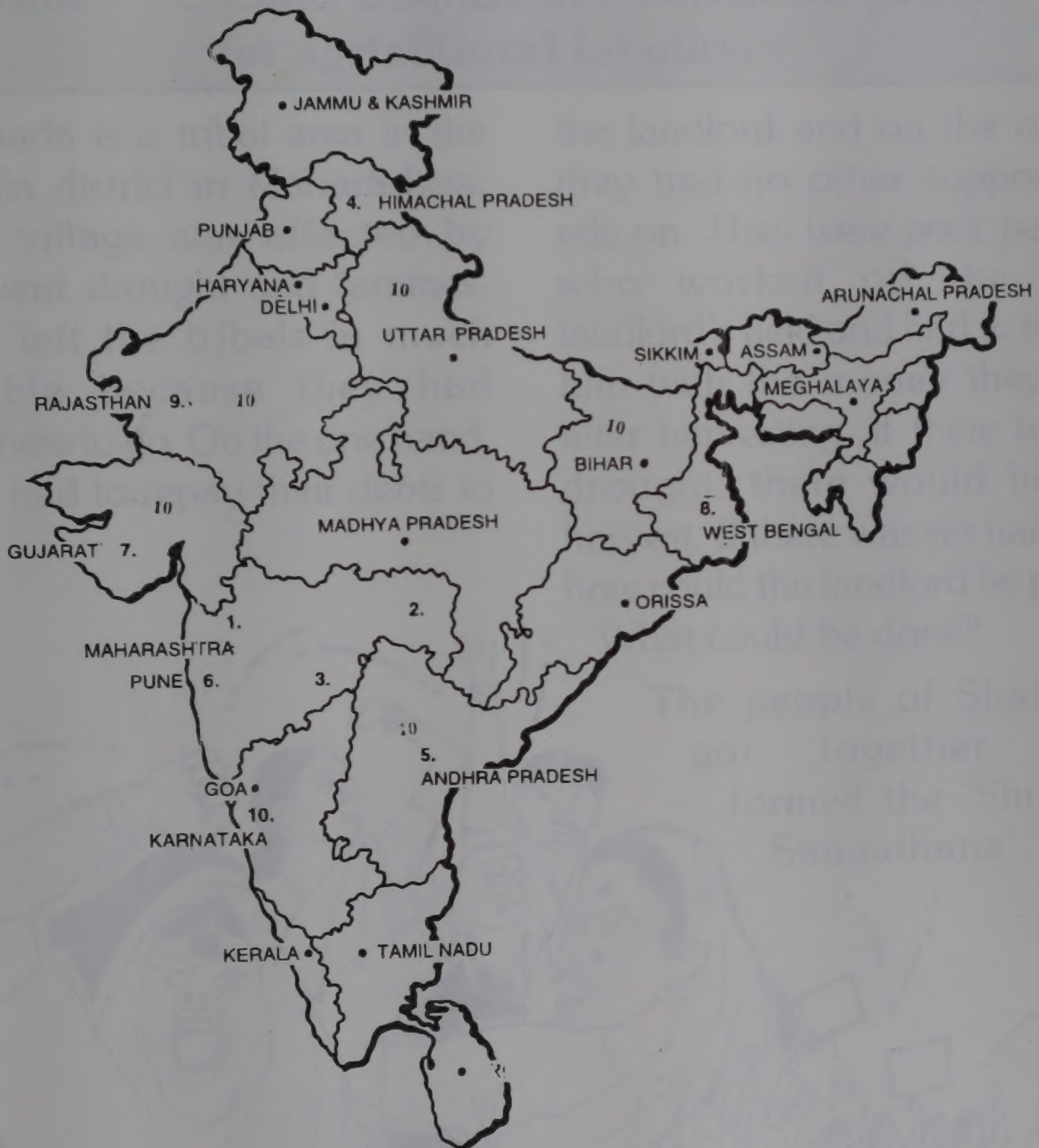
- 1) Shramik Sangathana (Maharashtra)
- 2) Anti-Arrack Agitation (Maharashtra)
- 3) The Anti-Price Rise Agitation (Maharashtra)
- 4) The Chipko Story (Uttar Pradesh)
- 5) Anti-Liquor Agitation (Andhra Pradesh)
- 6) All India Women's Conference (Pune-Maharashtra)
- 7) The Sewa Story (Gujarat)
- 8) The Tebhaga Uprising (West Bengal)
- 9) Women's Development Programme (Rajasthan)
- 10) Mahila Samakhya (Karnataka)

(also in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh)

SHRAMIK SANGATHANA

— THE LAND DISPUTE

INDIA



1. SHRAMIK SANGATHANA

— THE LAND DISPUTE

Where : Maharashtra (Shahada)

When : 1972

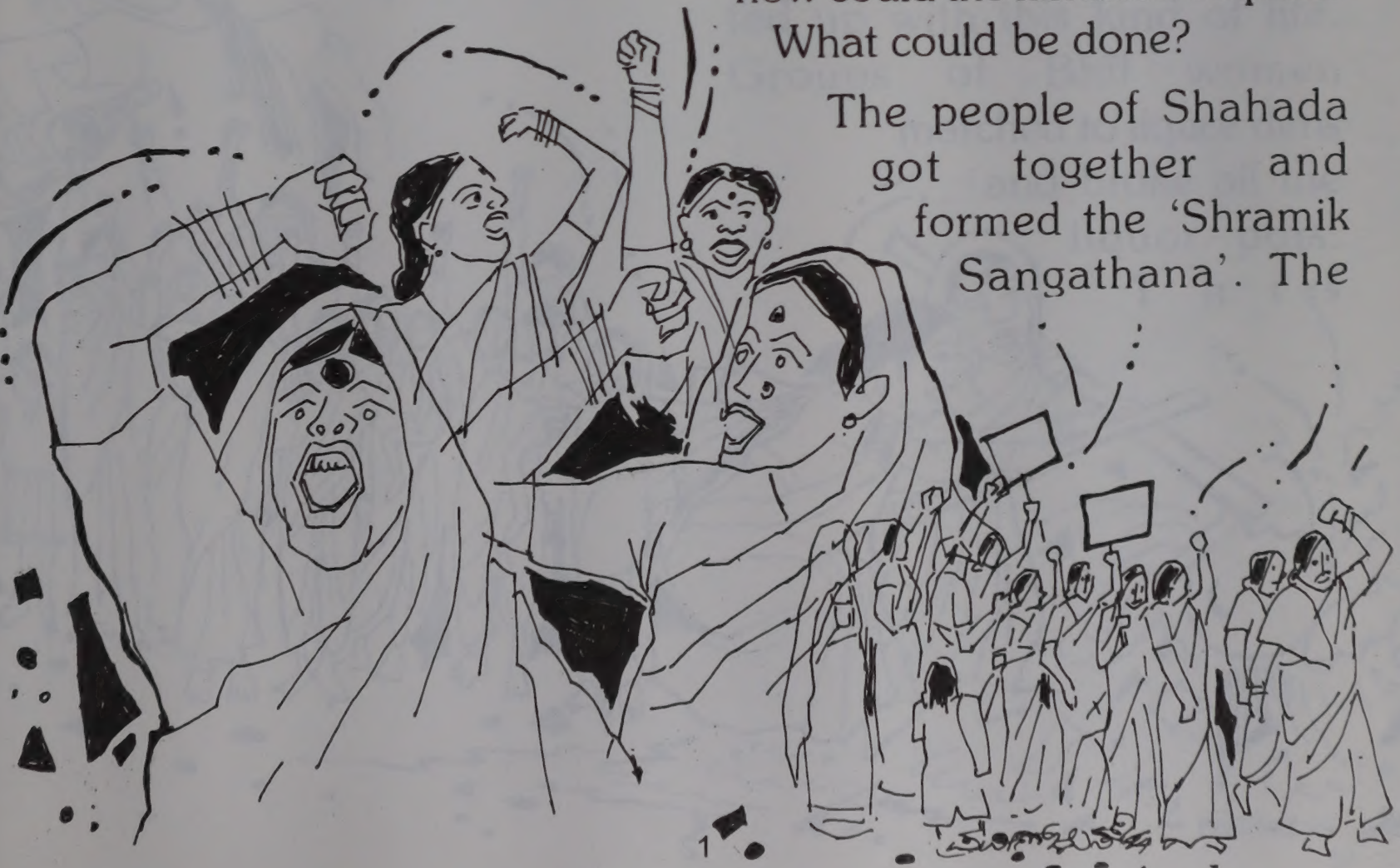
What : Land Dispute Movement for justice for agricultural labourers.

Shahada is a tribal area in the Dhulia district in Maharashtra. This village was affected by frequent drought and famines. This left the tribals in much trouble because they had nowhere to go. On the one hand, they had to repay their debts to

the landlord and on the other, they had no other support to rely on. They were poor people who worked on the rich landlord's field and had to repay him with the money they got after harvesting. If there was a drought, there would be no harvest. If there was no harvest, how could the landlord be paid?

What could be done?

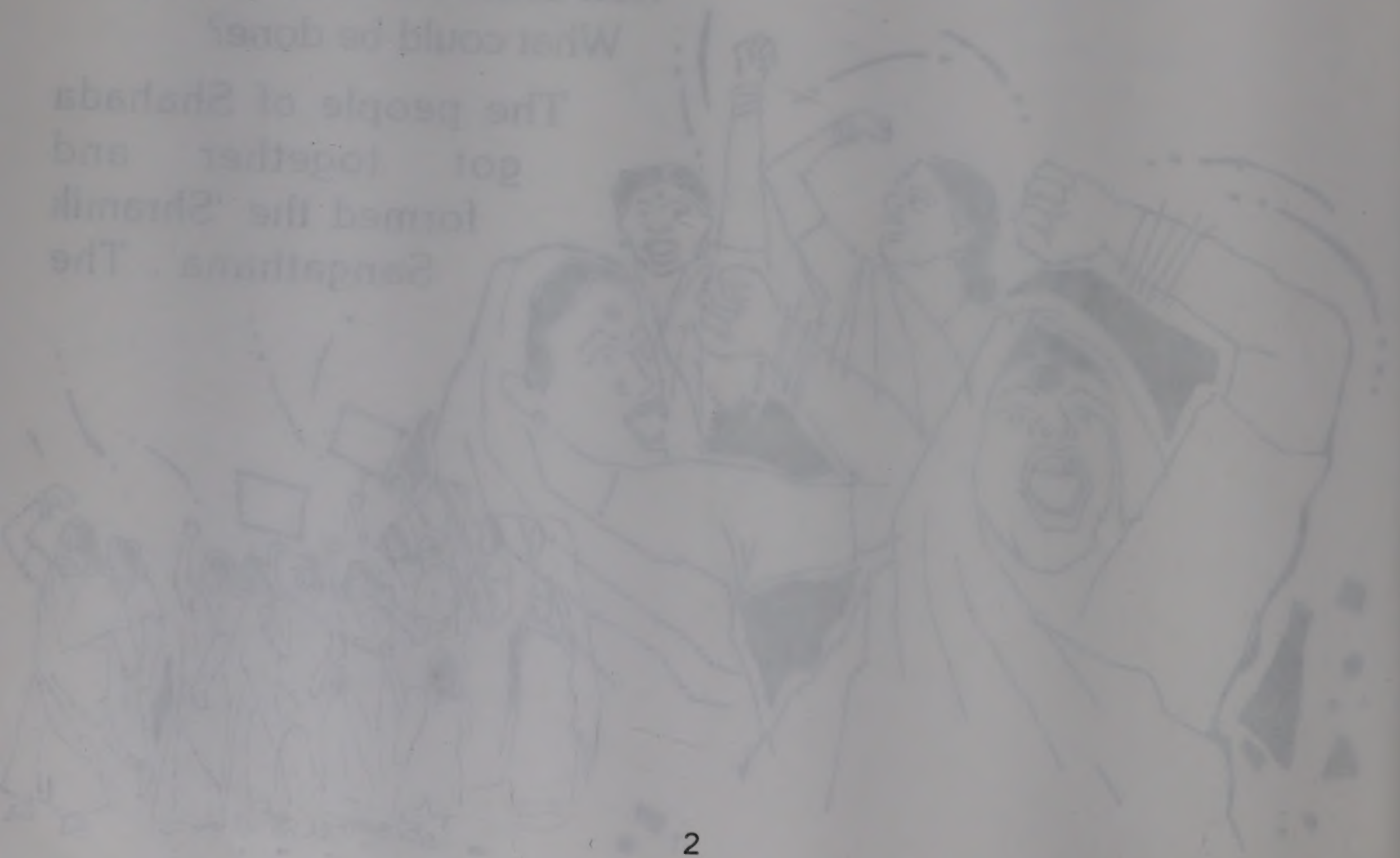
The people of Shahada got together and formed the 'Shramik Sangathana'. The



women of the 'Shramik Sangathana' played a very active role. They led demonstrations, shouted slogans and sang revolutionary songs and thereby encouraged the people. They went from hut to hut to persuade the men to join them in this fight. In this way they managed to get famine relief from the

government. Their success with the government encouraged them to face the landlords.

It was the women who proved stronger in getting their demands met by the landlords. This victory gave the women strength to fight other battles within their home and community together.



2. ANTI-ARRACK AGITATION

Where : Maharashtra (Shahada)

When : 1972

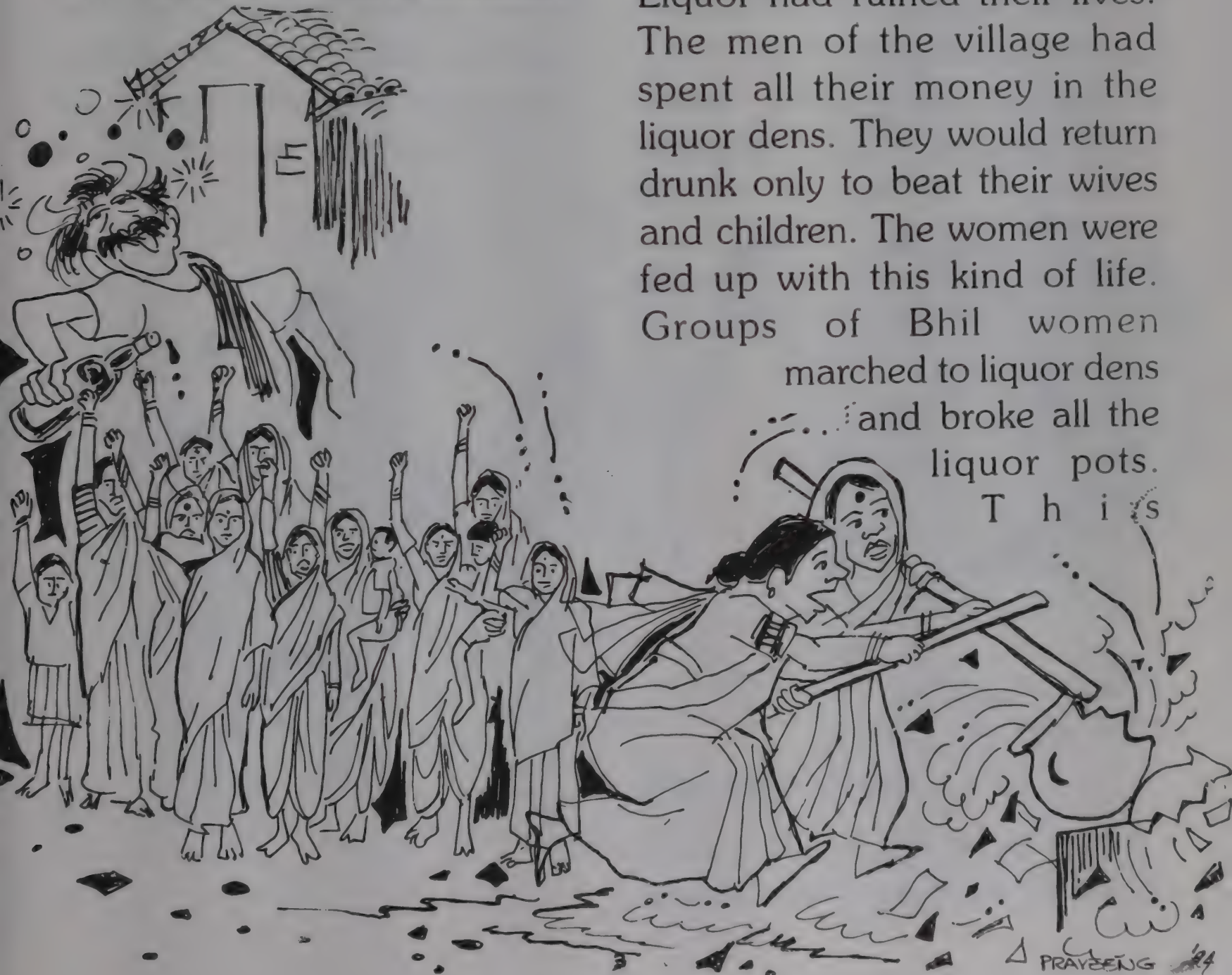
What : Anti - Arrack Agitation

For the Bhil women of Shahada, the positive outcome of their movement against the landlord acted as an eye-opener. They saw within their own communities and families,

other evils. "If we can solve one problem" they thought, "we can definitely solve others". This realisation led to the anti-alcohol agitation by women.

Liquor had ruined their lives. The men of the village had spent all their money in the liquor dens. They would return drunk only to beat their wives and children. The women were fed up with this kind of life. Groups of Bhil women marched to liquor dens and broke all the liquor pots.

This



movement began in 1972 and continued up to 1973.

In March 1973, the 'Shramik Sangathana' organised a women's '*Shibir*' - a camp at which women from Karamkheda village described how their husbands drank and beat them up. This was similar to the suffering of the women of Shahada. Then and there, the women got up and marched to the village. On the way, they

were joined by more and more women from villages along the route. On entering Karamkheda they went and broke all the liquor pots in the dens. They then went and gheraoed the Police Inspector and asked him why the liquor dens were not closed down. The Shahada movement thus moved from protesting against their landlords to agitating against liquor consumption.

3. THE ANTI PRICE-RISE AGITATION

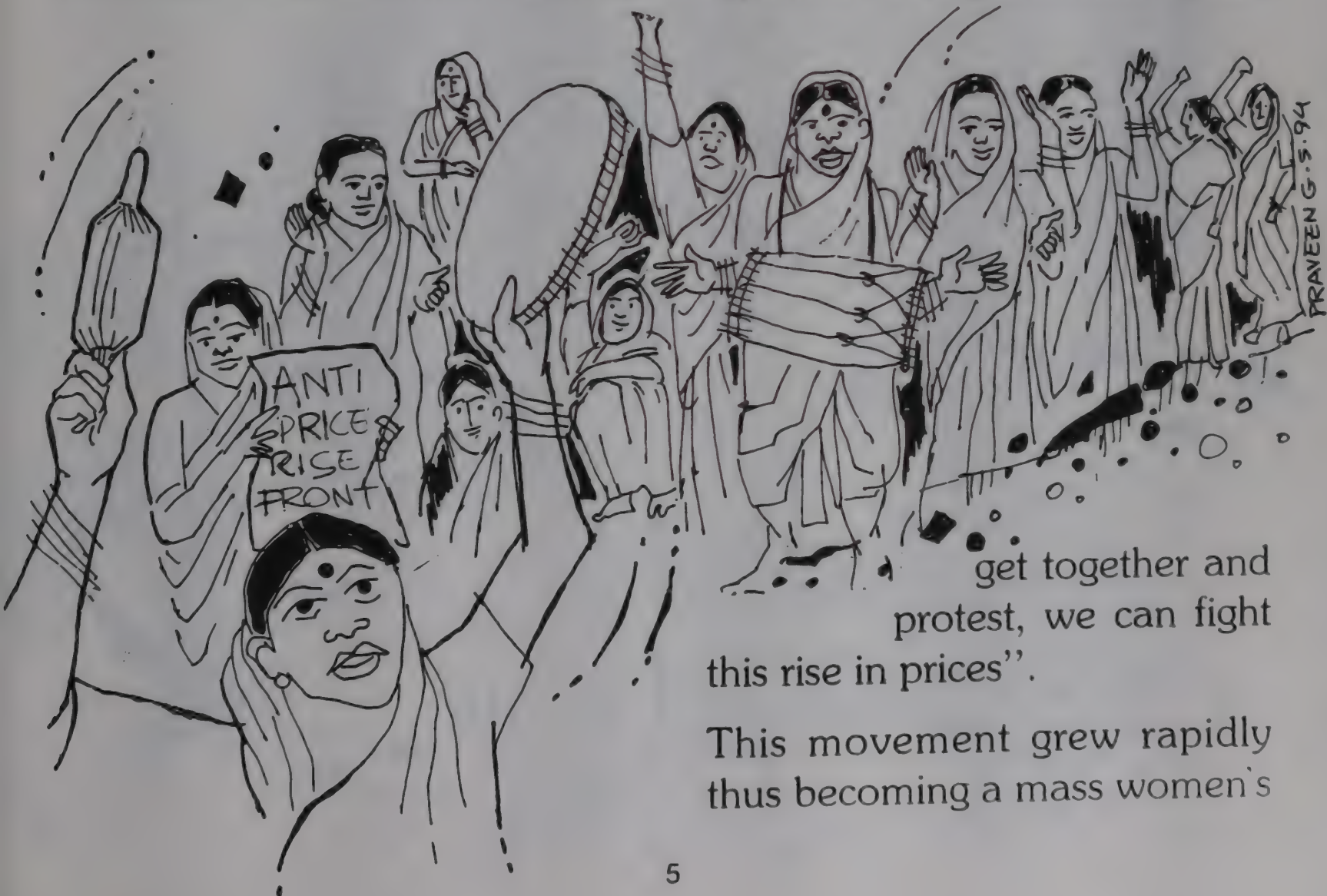
Where : Maharashtra

When : Early 1970's

What : Agitation against rising prices

In the early 1970's drought affected many areas in Maharashtra. This resulted in decreased production of food grains and other crops. This in turn led to a rise in prices of essential food items. This increase in prices affected both the villages as well as the towns. In 1973, two women Mrinal

Gore of the Socialist Party and Ahalya Rangnekar of the CPI-M together with many others formed the United Women's Anti-Price Rise Front (APRF). These women from the towns had learnt from their sisters in the villages who had got famine relief during the Shahada agitation. They decided, "If we

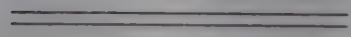


get together and protest, we can fight this rise in prices".

This movement grew rapidly thus becoming a mass women's

movement for consumer protection. Women demanded that both prices and distribution of essential commodities be fixed by the Government. Many housewives joined the women of the APRF in their agitation. They beat rolling pins against plates to show their disapproval.

These demonstrations were huge with nearly 20,000 women going to gherao MPs and industrialists. They also raided warehouses where goods were being hoarded. By coming together on this everyday issue the women registered their protest against the rising prices.



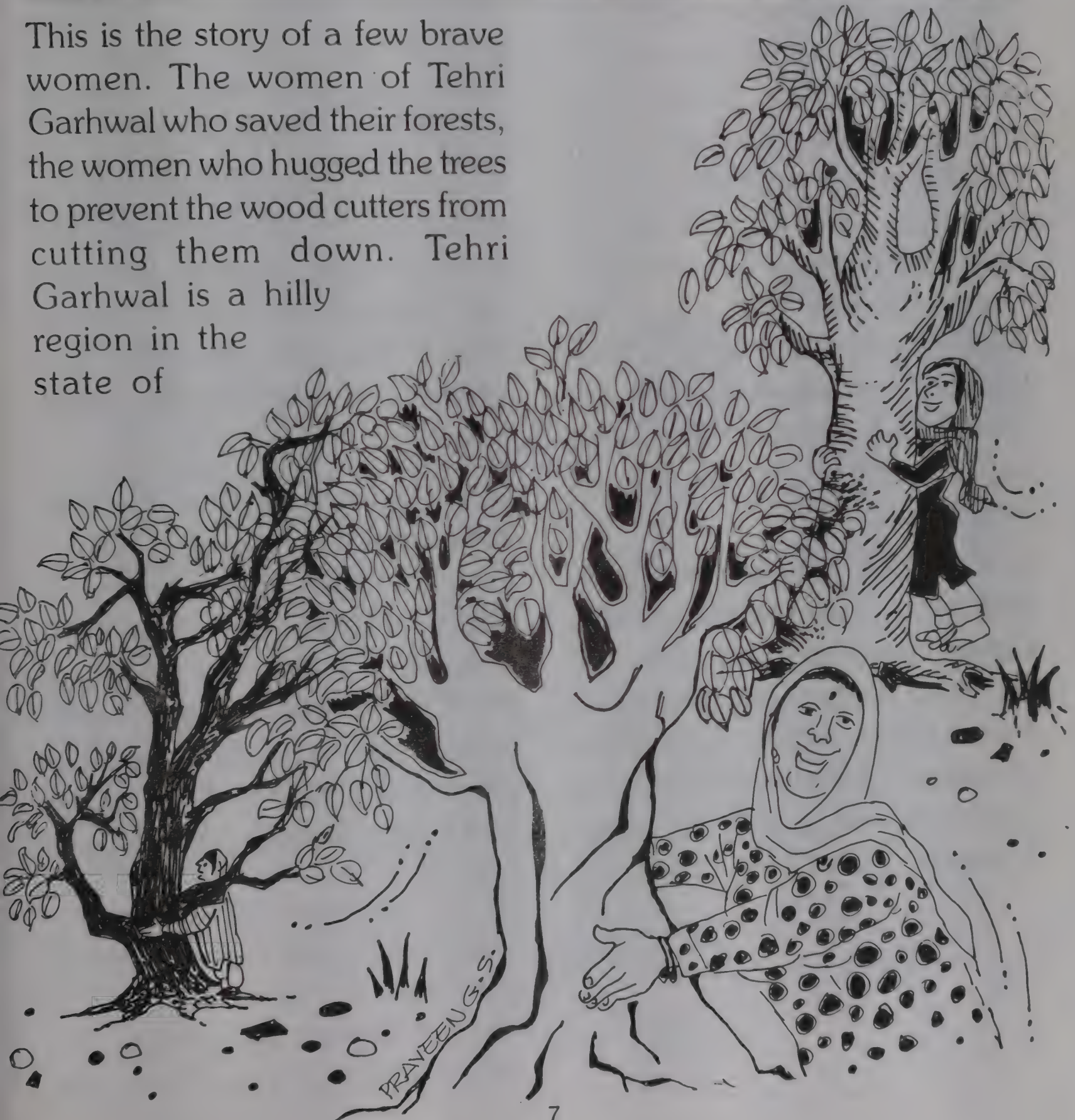
4. THE CHIPKO STORY

Where : Uttar Pradesh

When : 1979

What : How women stopped the destruction of their forests.

This is the story of a few brave women. The women of Tehri Garhwal who saved their forests, the women who hugged the trees to prevent the wood cutters from cutting them down. Tehri Garhwal is a hilly region in the state of



Uttar Pradesh in North India. The trees in this region prevent the soil from erosion due to heavy rains. This fertile soil provides grass for their cattle. How would they feed their cattle if the trees were cut?

The women pleaded with their men to do something to stop the felling of the trees. But the men shrugged their shoulders. How could they be expected to stop the contractor? He probably had powerful political connections. Seeing the men turn a deaf ear to their protest, the women took it upon themselves to save the forest. The women said, "This forest is our home, we will not let it be cut down".

In April 1979, the women threw out the men sent by the Government contractors to fell the trees. Women in many areas forced wood cutters in the guise of research scientists to leave the place. Armed police too were forced to retreat before the non-

violent strength of the women. These women did not care for their own lives in their bid to save the trees. Some women were even killed, but this did not dissuade others from continuing the protest.

In another village, Dhongri Paitoli, the women, inspired by their friends in Tehri Garhwal fought the government when it decided to cut down the trees to make way for a sheep centre and potato farm. Mahila Mangal Dal resorted to the 'Chipko' action 'hugging the trees and saved about 40 acres of oak forests.

The success of this 'Chipko movement' not only demonstrates the bravery of these women but also their strength in unity. the slogan of the 'Chipko movement' is, "Soil, water and vegetation are the gifts of the forest. Soil, water and vegetation are the basis of life".

5. ANTI-LIQUOR AGITATION

Where : Andhra Pradesh (Nellore)
When : 1992
What : Anti Liquor Agitation

Nellore is a district in Andhra Pradesh. The Government and several voluntary organisations started a literacy campaign there. This campaign was called 'Akshara Deepam'. Besides literacy programmes, 'Akshara Deepam' also helped create an awareness amongst the women. Awareness not only about their status, but also about capacity to improve it. It was during the literacy campaign, in 1992 that the now famous Andhra anti arrack agitation began.

'Sitamma Kathe' was one of the chapters in the literacy primer. It describes the plight of a poor woman Sitamma. Her husband drank away his wages at the local liquor shop. This story proved very close to the lives of almost all the women in the literacy class. They realised that it was the regular harassment and physical abuse by the drunken men which led to the



suicide of some of their sisters. They asked each other, "How is it that liquor supplies arrive in a village at least twice a day?" On the other hand, there is always shortage of food in the government controlled ration shops. They decided to do something to stop this.

A few women collected in front of the liquor shops. They forced the owners to close down their shops. All the villagers got to know about this. Different groups of women fought this evil in different ways.

One village for example, the women cooked their daily meal and forced the owner of the liquor shop to eat all their offerings. "You have been taking food away from us all these

years so eat unit it kills you, the way you have been killing us". The scared owner closed the shop and ran.

With the fall in consumption of arrack, there was more money for food and other essentials. Not only was there less physical and emotional abuse, but there was far less violence in general. An interesting factor is that men did not retaliate to this upsurge. This was because the women protested against the liquor and not the men themselves.

This movement has spread not only to the rest of South India but also all over the country. The women in many a place have found that they can solve their problems through co-operation and solidarity.

6. ALL INDIA WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

Where : Pune

When : 1920 onwards

What : Organisation of women in
Pre-Independence India

When the British came to India, they brought the English language with them. It was important that the men learnt this foreign language if they were to work for the Englishmen. So, the boys were sent to school to

learn English, Mathematics and Science. The girls stayed at home and helped their mothers in the kitchen. They were trained to be good housewives. Even the girls who were interested in studies were not allowed to go to school. The only education they had was within the four walls of the "Jenana". They gathered in a house and were taught basic house keeping, embroidery, tailoring etc. Though a little maths was taught, it was only to enable the girls to calculate money when they shopped for vegetables and household items.

By the 1920's, however, a few girls schools had been started by social reformers like Jyothiba Phule, Dr. Annie Besant & Panditha Ramabai. People were beginning to realise that education was important for



girls too. An English woman named Margaret Cousins was the founder secretary of the Women's India Association. She took up the issue of education for girls and wrote to several women all over the country. She requested that all these women meet to discuss this burning issue. She said, "Problems connected with girls' education are different in different provinces, so let us introduce educational reforms in each province. In this way we will solve other local problems also".

From each provinces, representatives were elected. They came together for an All India Conference at Pune in the late 1920s. This 1st conference was a grand success with 2000 people attending it. What happened at this conference? The women put forward all the problems relating to education and came to some important decisions that would improve the lot of women.

- a) The child's talents should be developed in the service of humanity.

- b) Secondary schools should have courses in domestic science, journalism, social science and architecture.
- c) Women students should be given scholarships to encourage them to study law, medicine, social sciences and architecture.

It took a great deal of courage in the society of those days to speak boldly about education for girls. This was made possible because of collective action by women from all over the country. These women decided to meet at regular intervals.

The 2nd Conference: The main debate was whether the conference should work on a single issue or if it should widen its scope.

The 3rd Conference : The women decided to set up separate committees to deal with all issues concerning women other than education.

The 4th Conference: Women discussed reforms in inheritance laws. March 1st was also declared as Women's Day.

The 4th, 5th and 6th Conference : Women's conditions of labour were discussed. The Maternity Benefit Act and Sarda Act against early marriage were also debated.

1928 : The AIWC started collecting funds to open the Lady Irwin College of Domestic Science in Delhi.

A Commission was also set up to look after the legal problems of Indian women.

A paper on Women's political, social and educational status in India was presented to the Government of India.

1938 : An English bulletin was started with the Hindi title "ROSHNI"

1943 : There was a famine in Bengal. The people of Bengal needed help. The AIWC came to their rescue. When Vijayalakshmi Pandit was President of AIWC, a 'Save the Children Fund', was started. People from abroad donated money generously to help the AIWC in this project.

Many of the women from the AIWC joined the Nationalist Movement. They worked shoulder to shoulder with the men to fight for India's independence. Although the AIWC functions till this day its activities have reduced. Today several other organisations have taken up Women's issues. However, the AIWC remains the pioneering effort in the cause of Indian women.



7.

THE SEWA STORY

Where : Gujarat

When : 1972

What : The largest trade union for women in the world.

'Sewa' means service. In Gujarat SEWA means 'Self Employed Women's Association'. SEWA, with its membership of about 50,000 women has been recognised all over the world as a unique and special institution. Gujarat is the seat of the textile

industry in India. Many men and women work in this industry. Some of them work with the big companies. Others sit with bales of cloth on the roadside. These textile unions that work within the large companies look after the wants of the workers. However, there



was no one to look into the needs of the street vendors. They are untrained, illiterate and poor. Their sister in the factories were doing well and looked prosperous. They felt deprived and wished they could get the same benefits.

They had heard of Ela Bhat, a lawyer who was heading the women's wing of the Textile Labour Association (TLA). They asked her, "What about us? Can't we get any of these benefits?" She replied "You need to organise yourselves if you want to get the benefits" Immediately, two dozen women came together and pooled a few paise. In this modest way SEWA was started.

SEWA organised women who work in their houses, in the streets of cities, in the fields and villages of rural India, women who had no fixed employer. Women from other sectors drew confidence from this movement. They came seeking help to hold on to the only wage earning occupation they knew.

The basis of SEWA's ideology is that women from all levels of

society joined together to plan **with** rather than **for** poor women. The strength of the organisation is in its membership. Today the poor cart pullers and vendors who had come in distress to knock on SEWA's door are members of the various committee's in SEWA. They have, at last, found a direction for their lives.

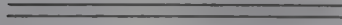
For most of these women, being members of SEWA has completely changed their lives. They are even making their own video films. Video SEWA is proof that even an illiterate woman can handle a complicated gadget like video camera if she was given training in that direction. These vendors not only give notice to SEWA'S women's issues but also reach thousands of other members. They act as a tool for teaching, organising and inspiring their sisters.

In the early years of SEWA, the women found the conventional banks rejecting their savings because the amounts were too small. They thought, 'Why not start our own bank?' This is exactly what they did and today

the SEWA Bank is a flourishing concern. In the words of a woman from SEWA. "The bank is like our mother's house, because we can take our problems there. Our mothers

take us seriously and help us mediate problems".

SEWA has shown the world that poor women can do anything if they have the grit and determination.



8. THE TEBHAGA UPRISING

When : 1946

Where : Bengal

What : Agrarian Movement for land reforms



It was 1946. The people of India were under the total control of the British. They had to bear the brunt of the feudal and colonial rule. The people were tired of being cowed down. They refused to submit to the feudal relations which kept them enslaved. The cultivator was not the master over his production. He could not enjoy the fruits of his labour. The tenants could be

thrown out at any time. They had no occupancy rights and yet had to bear the cost of production. They felt cheated and exploited. The women were especially victimised. They had no economic independence. The rural women were also subjected to sexual exploitation by the rich landlord who was on the side of the British.

The peasants felt robbed of what was rightfully theirs. They thought "Why should we be made slaves on our own land?" Out of desperation and anger they rose against the British and the agrarian movement.

This movement started in one village in Bengal and gradually spread to every corner of the state. The rural poor demanded an increase in their share to two thirds of produce of the land where they laboured. 'Tebhaga' means 'two thirds' and this is how the movement got its name. About 6 million men and women demanded changes in the landlord-tenant relationship.

The Tebhaga movement stands

out as the most important political event in 20th century Bengal. Rural women took the lead role in the movement.

An unique feature of Tebhaga is a creation of womens fighting troops called 'Nari Bahini'. Nari Bahini's were formed when the police arrived with warrants of arrest to prevent the peasants from harvesting the crop. Women volunteers resisted and then formed their own group or 'Bahini'. This drove the policemen away. Later, Nari Bahinis were also formed to guard the village. Thus even in the feudal and patriarchal society of pre-independence Bengal, Women showed their courage and capacity for action.

9. WOMENS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Where : Rajasthan

When : 1984

What : Government Sponsored Development Programme for Women.



In the Datan village of Srinagar Panchayat Samiti in Rajasthan a 'Sathin of the WDP came to know of the Handpump Abhiyan in Ajmer district which provides for installation of handpumps in villages. She shared this information with the other women of her village during a meeting. The group

decided that the Harijan & Gujan Bastis in their village needed handpumps. The women made out an application for two handpumps through the Sarpanch which was accepted. However the upper caste group prevented the installation of the pumps in the Harijan and Gujjar

mohallas. They wanted these pumps for their *mohalla*. Violence broke out in the village. Eventually the Harijans managed to get one handpump in their mohalla but the Gujans could not. After this, three attempts were made to install the pump in the Gujan basti. But, on each occasion, the powerful upper castes prevented them from doing it. The women's group organised by the Sathin met again and decided that they needed to act promptly. The women gathered together and took charge of the situation. They stood in the Gujan *mohalla* the whole day till the handpump was installed. Together they managed to solve the problem.

What is the W D P?

It is a Government Programme

What does it do?

It tries to empower women by giving them information, education and training. It helps them to recognise and improve their social and economic status. The programme is conducted in selected villages. Each selected Gram Panchayat has

one trained village level worker called a Sathin.

She is responsible for the formation of women's forum in the village.

A cluster of 10 Gram Panchayats with their 10 Sathins work closely together under the guidance of a Pracheta at the district level.

The co-ordinating body at the district level is the District Women's Development Agency or the DWDA under the chairmanship of the District Collector. At the district level, there is also an IDARA (Information Development and Resource Agency). All the district IDARA's are co-ordinated by a State level IDARA. The entire programme is in the charge of a Director.

One of the first activities of the WDP was the training of Sathins and Prachetas. Training is seen as the backbone of the programme and is innovative, experimental and participatory. Sathins hold a monthly meeting where they discuss the problems of their village. At regular

intervals, *shibirs* or camps are organised to exchange information and find solutions to their problems.

This programme has given women the courage and strength to tackle the problems in the

villages. Most of all it has given them the confidence that there are many other women with similar problems and that they will not be alone in their struggle for a decent life.



Where : Karnataka

When : 1989

What : Government Programme for the empowerment of women

The women of Lingapur colony in Mysore District joined together to buy a kerosene lamp and start a literacy class on their own.

A group of women from Matapura village (Muddebihal Taluk, Bijapur district) where a land dispute had been pending for over ten years, camped outside the Assistant Commissioner's



office and house in Jamkhandi, to press for the resolution of their long standing problem. Their determination and persistence so impressed the officer that he not only promptly visited their village but immediately ordered a survey of the disputed land.

Women of Bairanhalli (Bidar Dist) paid a visit to the local sub-inspector of police, asking him questions about the laws relating to caste and dowry and demanding to know what help women could expect from the police station.

In Bidar district, a number of day care creches are functioning in full swing, women agricultural labourers have expressed their appreciation saying they have greatly benefited from these facilities which leave them free to work without worrying about their children.

They say they are happy to find that their children are not just well looked after in these creches, but that they are also learning a lot at the same time. The women who run the creche are 'Sangha' women of the

Government sponsored programme for women Mahila Samakhya.

The women in all the above incidents who confidently dealt with their problems are all sangha women. The Mahila Sanghas are women's collectives which have been built by Mahila Samakhya. Mahila Samakhya is an organisation which gives women access to knowledge and information and thereby equips them with skills as tools of empowerment (including literacy). It enables the girl child to become an empowered woman. It helps raise women's self image and confidence and create a time and space for women to build their own collective strength in the form of 'Sanghas'. The Mahila Samakhya enables women to set up and manage the support services they need and to generate their own resources. It helps women confront atrocities and oppression. In this process of empowering women, Mahila Samakhya changes and challenge other stereotypes.

The Sangha creates a separate space wherein the women can meet regularly and examine themselves and their lives. It also serves as a vehicle for progress towards the goal of empowerment.

Sahayogini's and Sahayaki's are the women trained by Mahila Samakhya to give the sangha a sustained leadership and direction. They try to help the women recognise that the sangha is not merely a means for securing loans or other economic benefits. They also help the women become self reliant through the collective effort. The Sahayogini's have the added task of convincing the people that with minimal resources their programme is worth associating with, even if it does not promise any immediate services, dividends or obvious benefits.

Mahila Samakhya also conducts Mela's thereby providing time and space for 1000's of women from all over to meet, free from their daily pre-occupations and life long encumbrances. The Mahila Mahiti Mela is one which

stands out as far as the women's participation goes. More than 1000 women went. Some travelled by bus for over 30 hours one way, many had left their villages for the first time and most of them having never ventured anywhere unaccompanied by their menfolk. They made the necessary arrangements and left their families to fend for themselves while they spent three days enjoying themselves and acquiring knowledge.

The *Mela* had such a great impact on its participants that it enthused many of them to raise their own funds to conduct the *Mini-Melas* for fellow women in their own village. It also gave a fresh impetus to the process of building up collectives in villages where the sangha formation was proving difficult.

The sahayogini's have trained the women so that in case they are unable to attend the meeting, the women conduct the meetings themselves. The sangha women were so familiar with government offices and negotiation technique that they

independently tackled several issues such as loans, ration cards, pension, borewell repairs etc. all this in the absence of the Sahayogini concerned.

An important and encouraging aspect of the process of building collectives is the women's eagerness to spread the concept of solidarity. For

instance, in Mysore, the non-tribal women were enthusiastic about the programme being conducted for the tribal women (Dalits) "All women should move forward, not only us". In their opinion, there is no place for discrimination based on caste or community in a true sangha!

Mahila Samakhya is a programme of the Human Resource Development Ministry, Government of India which has also been running in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh.

About us

UMA is a Resource Centre for Women in Panchayati Raj, a project of the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) located in Bangalore, Karnataka. ISST as an institution has made contributions in the area of research and documentation on issues relating to gender, poverty and Panchayati Raj.

UMA aspires to strengthen the solidarity and enhance the capabilities of women in politics by fulfilling the longfelt need for information exchange and networking among individuals and organisations working in Panchayati Raj.

UMA also published a newsletter related to issues in Panchayati Raj. A major component of the UMA project is the design and implementation of a training programme for the women representatives elected to the Gram Panchayats in selected areas of four districts of Karnataka.

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